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SPECIFICATION

NEAR-FIELD OPTICAL HEAD

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TECHNICAL FIELD

This invention relates to near-field optical heads and, more particularly, to a near-field optical head that a near-field microscope technology is applied to a head of a recording apparatus typically a hard disk or the like.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

The near-field microscope provided with an optical probe utilizing near-field light allows for sample observation with resolution exceeding beyond a diffraction limit of light. Such a near-field microscope has an optical probe using, at a sample-opposed end, a microscopic aperture provided at a sharpened tip of an optical fiber or in an on-silicon-substrate chip formed through anisotropic etching, or otherwise a sharpened tip of an optical fiber or a microscopic protrusion on that chip.

Meanwhile, there is a proposal of a near-field optical memory as disclosed, for example, in (E. Betzig et al., Science 257, 189 (1992)) applied with the above observation principle.

In such applications, there is a need to bring a microscopic aperture or protrusion formed in a recording or

obtainable. Furthermore, high resolution is difficult to realize.

Moreover, the distance between a light emitting element or light detecting element placed on a head top surface and a microscopic aperture in a head bottom surface is provided equal to a thickness of a slider. In the case of using a light emitting element, the intensity of light illuminating the microscopic aperture attenuates proportional to a square of the distance, resulting in a problem of difficulty in obtaining a sufficient signal intensity. In the case of using a light detecting element, there encounters a problem that no sufficient signal intensity is obtainable unless the light detecting section is made in a large area.

Meanwhile, during standstill of a head, the slider at its surface is contacted with a recording medium. Consequently, adsorption between the slider and the recording medium is enhanced by an adsorption water present on a recording medium surface, leading to a problem of damaging the slider and recording medium at a start of head operation. In order to avoid such a problem, conventionally a mechanism has been needed to move the slider in a direction vertical to the recording medium. This, however, results in a problem of drawback in reducing the head size.

Also, when floating the head, the slider is structurally inclined relative to the recording medium

surface. Due to this, the microscopic aperture has to be arranged with tilt relative to the recording medium surface so that the microscopic aperture at one part is positioned distant from the recording medium. Because the intensity of near-field light attenuates in an exponential fashion against a distance between the microscopic aperture and the recording medium, it is difficult for the portion of the microscopic aperture that is distant from the recording medium to have sufficient interaction with the recording medium. Thus, there has been a problem of difficulty in obtaining a sufficient signal intensity.

Therefore, the present invention has been made in view of the above and it is an object of the present invention to provide a high sensitive, high resolving near-field optical head which is simple in structure with a reduced distance between a recording medium and a head, wherein control is made for a distance between the recording medium and the head to decrease a contact area of a slider with the recording medium at start and stop of operation and to put the probe out of contact with a recording medium during standstill, thus preventing damage to the probe and recording medium.

DISCLOSURE OF THE INVENTION

In order to achieve the above object, a near-field optical head according to the present invention is, in a

near-field optical head, having: a slider supported by a suspension arm providing a load weight and obtaining a floating force due to a relative motion to a recording medium, and producing a gap cooperatively with the recording medium due to a balance between the load weight and the floating force; and a probe formed in a bottom surface of the slider, and producing a near-field light or converting a near-field light produced on a surface of a recording medium into a propagation light; wherein the recording medium and the probe interact through the near-field light when the slider scans a surface of the recording medium thereby recording and reproducing information; the near-field optical head characterized in that: the probe protrudes from the slider bottom surface.

Accordingly, even if the distance between the slider and the recording medium is several tens to several hundreds nano-meters, it is possible to reduce the distance between the probe and the recording medium to as small as several to several tens nano-meters. This enhances interaction between the near-field light and the recording medium, thereby enabling recording with high sensitivity and high density. Also, at a start and stop of head operation, the slider bottom surface and the recording medium is small in contact area and hence can be protected from damage due to contact.

Also, a near-field optical head according to the invention, in the first-stated near-field optical head, is characterized in that the probe is a microscopic aperture.

Accordingly, in addition to the first-stated effect, it is possible to cause interaction between the recording medium and the probe due to a light principally based on a near-field light. Thus, high S/N is obtainable.

Also, a near-field optical head according to the invention, in the first-stated near-field optical head, is characterized in that the probe is a microscopic protrusion.

Accordingly, in addition to the first-stated effect, it is satisfactory to form as a probe a simplified protrusion without having an internal structure. Therefore, the probe is easy to manufacture, and can be stably manufactured at low cost.

Also, a near-field optical head according to the invention, in any one of the above near-field optical heads, is characterized by comprising a mechanism which accommodates the probe in the slider bottom surface or an inside of the slider except upon recording or reproducing of the information, and protrudes the probe from the slider bottom surface by or in a predetermined amount or direction upon recording or reproducing the information.

Accordingly, in addition to any of the effects, the slider bottom surface and the recording medium surface can be

protected from damage in both modes of during head standstill and at operation start/stop. Also, the parallel arrangement of the probe with the recording medium surface realizes high sensitive head.

Also, a near-field optical head according to the invention, in any one of the above near-field optical heads, is characterized in that the probe is formed in a plurality of number in the slider bottom surface, the plurality of probes being individually set with the amount or direction of protrusion or both thereof on an each probe basis.

Accordingly, in addition to any of the effects, it becomes possible to define a sensitivity on a probe-by-probe basis. Also, one probe can be utilized for tracking or high-speed reproduction.

Also, a near-field optical head according to the invention, in any one of the above near-field optical head, is characterized by comprising a mechanism which simultaneously controls the amount or direction of protrusion of the probe or both thereof, and scans the slider over the recording medium.

Accordingly, in addition to any of the effects, it becomes possible to control sensitivity, resolution and the like simultaneously with data recording/reproducing. Also, even where there are concaves and convexes on the recording

medium surface, because recording/reproducing is possible, increase of density is possible.

Also, a near-field optical head according to the invention, is characterized by comprising: a slider supported by a suspension arm providing a load weight and obtaining a floating force due to a relative motion to a recording medium, and producing a gap cooperatively with the recording medium due to a balance between the load weight and the floating force; at least one hole in an inverted frustum form formed through the slider so as to provide at an apex a microscopic aperture in the slider bottom surface; and a light emitting element or light detecting element provided in a bottom of the inverted frustum formed hole; wherein a distance between the microscopic aperture and the light emitting element or light detecting element is given shorter than a thickness of the slider.

Accordingly, even if the thickness of the slider is several hundred micro-meters, it is possible to reduce a distance between the microscopic aperture and the light emitting element or light detecting element to several tens micro-meters or less. Thus, the intensity of light at the microscopic aperture can be increased thereby realizing a high sensitivity head.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

Fig. 1 is a schematic structural view showing a near-field optical head according to Embodiment 1 of this invention.

Fig. 2 is a schematic structural view showing a near-field optical head according to Embodiment 2 of this invention.

Fig. 3 is a schematic structural view showing a near-field optical head according to Embodiment 3 of this invention.

Fig. 4 is a schematic structural view showing a near-field optical head according to Embodiment 4 of this invention.

Fig. 5 is a schematic structural view showing a near-field optical head according to Embodiment 5 of this invention.

Fig. 6 is a schematic structural view showing a near-field optical head according to Embodiment 6 of this invention.

Fig. 7 is a structural view of an information reproducing apparatus using a near-field optical head according to Embodiment 1 of this invention.

Fig. 8 is a schematic structural view of an information reproducing apparatus using a near-field optical head according to Embodiment 8 of this invention.

for controlling a position of the recording medium 33. The polarization of the light produced from the laser oscillator 21 is controlled by the wavelength plates 22, 23, and introduced to the optical head 1 through the optical waveguide 24.

As will be stated later in Fig. 1, a near-field light 7 caused at a bottom surface of the optical head interacts with the recording medium 33. As a result, a scattering light is produced. Although Fig. 7 showed a structure for detecting an upwardly reflected one of the scattering light with respect to the recording medium, it is easy to make a structure for detecting the transmission light through the recording medium. The scattering light is focused by the focusing lens 29 and then converted into an electric signal by the light detecting element 25. This signal is sent to the output signal processing circuit 26 where it is subjected to processing of signal component extraction and the like, and thereafter sent to the control circuit 27. The control circuit 27 generates a data output 28 based on the received signal, and sends control signals to the optical head drive actuator 30 and the recording medium drive actuator 34.

Fig. 1 is a schematic structural view showing a near-field optical head according to Embodiment 1 of the present invention. More specifically, it illustrates a sectional structure of a recording medium and a position in

accessing the recording medium. A slider 1 is supported by a suspension arm (not shown). These suspension arm and slider 1 constitute a flying head mechanism. The suspension arm has a voice coil motor (not shown) as its drive source to cause swing about a swing shaft. The slider 1 has a taper 1a provided at its scanning direction. The taper 1a, slider bottom surface 1b and recording medium 3 surface form an air passage 1c in a wedge film form. The slider 1 is applied by a load weight directed toward the recording medium 3 by the suspension arm and gimbals spring. The slider 1 is positioned on a track of the recording medium 3 through seek and following control. The slider 1 has a hole in an inverted frustrum form as a light passage 5. Although in the present embodiment the light passage 5 is made in an inverted frustrum form, it may be in a rectangular parallelepiped or circular columnar form. The light passage 5 has one tip having a microscopic aperture 7 provided in the slider 1 bottom surface and an opposite tip covered by a light emitting element 2 bonded on a top surface of the slider 1. The recording medium 3 is formed thereon with a record region 4 to accommodate unit data. The slider bottom surface has a vicinity portion 6 of the microscopic aperture 7 that is protruded from the slider 1 bottom surface toward the recording medium 3. Due to this, a distance h' between the microscopic aperture 7 and the recording medium 3 surface is given smaller than a distance h between the slider bottom

surface 1b and the recording medium 3 surface. The slider possessing such structure is manufactured by a semiconductor microlithography technique such as anisotropic etching. The light emitted by the light emitting element 2 is guided to the microscopic aperture 7 through the light path 5. Here, because the microscopic aperture 7 is smaller than a wavelength of light, a light field based on a near-field light is generated on the microscopic aperture 7 on a recording medium 3 side. This near-field light and the memory region 4 interact to effect recording/reading of data. The distance h between the bottom surface of the slider 1 and the surface of the recording medium 3 is typically several tens to several hundred nano-meters. Hence, there is difficulty in causing the near-field light to interact with the memory region 4 with sufficient intensity. However, because there is protrusion in the vicinity portion 6 of the microscopic aperture 7, the microscopic aperture 7 is positioned in proximity to the surface of the recording medium 3. The intensity of the near-field light exponentially attenuates with respect to a distance from the microscopic aperture 7. Accordingly, it is critical to position the microscopic aperture 7 as close as possible to the memory region 4. With the structure of the present embodiment, the microscopic aperture 7 can be put in proximity to the surface of the recording medium 3. This makes it possible to cause a sufficient intensity of near-field

light interaction, thus realizing a high sensitive optical head. Also, the proximity of the microscopic aperture 7 to the surface of the recording medium 3 allows the memory region 4 on the surface of the recording medium 3 to be made small in area, realizing a high resolution optical head. Also, because the slider 1 and the recording medium 3 surface are structurally in contact with only at the vicinity portion 6 of the microscopic aperture 7, there is weakening in adsorption force acted due to adsorption water or the like between the slider 1 and the recording medium 3. Thus, there is less mechanical damage to the slider 1 and recording medium 3 upon start and stop of head operation.

A similar effect was obtained where a light detecting element was used in place of the light emitting element 2. The proximity of the microscopic aperture 7 to the recording medium 3 makes it possible to cause a sufficient intensity of near-field light interaction so that a scattered near-field light as a propagation light reaches the light detecting element with high intensity. This realized an optical head with high sensitivity and resolution.

(Embodiment 2)

Fig. 2 is a schematic structural view showing a near-field optical head according to Embodiment 2 of the invention. The operation mechanism is the same as Embodiment 1, hence omitting explanation thereof. In the present

embodiment, a slider 1 is structured by a top surface dug down to bonded with a light emitting element 2, as compared to the other portion. The slider with such a structure is fabricated by a semiconductor manufacturing technology such as anisotropic etching. Although in the conventional structure the light from the light emitting element 2 has to travel over a distance d_1 from a top surface of the slider 1 to the microscopic aperture 7, in the present embodiment it may satisfactorily travel only by a distance d_2 . The light intensity at the microscopic aperture 7 has an attenuation in proportion to a square of a distance from the light emitting element 2 to the microscopic aperture 7. Accordingly, it is critical to decrease the distance between the light emitting element 2 and the microscopic aperture 7. In the present embodiment, however, the light emitting element 2 is structurally close to the microscopic aperture 7, thus improving input light intensity at the microscopic aperture 7. In order to effect data recording/reading with high sensitivity, it is critical to produce a sufficient strength of a near-field light. One way for realizing it is to increase a light intensity at the microscopic aperture 7. This embodiment has realized it. Similar effect was obtained where a light detecting element was used in place of the light emitting element 2. The slider 1 top surface, onto which the light detecting element is bonded, is structured by digging

down as compared to the other portion. Thus, the light detecting element is structurally positioned close to the microscopic aperture 7 so that the light detecting portion with a small area can obtain a sufficient signal intensity. Thus, an optical head with high resolution was realized.

(Embodiment 3)

Fig. 3 is a schematic structural view showing a near-field optical head according to Embodiment 3 of the invention. The difference from Embodiment 1 lies in a structure that a slider 1 top surface on which a light emitting element 2 is bonded is dug down as compared to the other portion. The other structures and manufacturing method are similar to Embodiment 1, hence omitting explanations thereof. Although in Embodiment 1 the light from the light emitting element 2 has to travel over a distance d_1 from a top surface of the slider 1 to the microscopic aperture 7, in the present embodiment it may satisfactorily travel only by a distance d_2 . The input light intensity at the microscopic aperture 7 can be improved similarly to Embodiment 2. Furthermore, the slider bottom surface has a vicinity portion 6 of a microscopic aperture 7 protruded toward a recording medium, making it possible to put the microscopic aperture 7 close to a recording medium 3. In the present embodiment, the distance over which a near-field light is to reach for realizing data recording/reading with high sensitivity and high density is

not the conventional h but a shorter h' . Thus, a sufficient intensity of near-field light interaction is caused, realizing data recording/reading with high sensitivity and high density. Also, at a standstill of the head, the slider 1 is in contact with a surface of the recording medium 3 without flying over the recording medium 3 surface. However, because the slider 1 and the recording medium 3 surface are structurally in contact with only at the vicinity portion 6 of the microscopic aperture 7, there is weakening in adsorption force acted due to adsorption water or the like between the slider 1 and the recording medium 3. Thus, there is less mechanical damage to the slider 1 and recording medium 3 upon start and stop of head operation. A similar effect was obtained if a light detecting element was used in place of the light emitting element 2 as in Embodiments 1, 2 and 3.

(Embodiment 4)

Fig. 4 is a schematic structural view showing a near-field optical head according to Embodiment 4 of the invention. The difference from Embodiment 3 lies in a structure that a microscopic aperture portion 7 is protruded from a slider 1 due to piezoelectric elements 8. The other structures and manufacturing method are similar to Embodiment 3, hence omitting explanations thereof. Fig. 4(b) is a head top view wherein piezoelectric elements 8 are bonded on both sides of a microscopic aperture portion 7. As shown in Fig.

4(c), a potential is applied to the piezoelectric elements 8 to cause volumetric change therein to thereby protrude the vicinity portion 6 of the slider microscopic aperture portion 7 toward the recording medium 3. By controlling the voltage applied to the piezoelectric elements 8, the microscopic aperture portion 7 can be accommodated in the slider 1 bottom surface or protruded from the slider 1 bottom surface.

During a standstill of the head, the microscopic aperture portion 7 is accommodated in the slider 1 bottom surface whereby adhesibility is enhanced for the slider 1 and the recording medium 3 to prevent damage due to external vibration. At a start and stop of head operation, the microscopic aperture portion 7 is protruded from the slider 1 bottom surface to decrease the adhesibility between the slider 1 and the recording medium 3, effecting operation start and stop with resistance reduced. This mechanism, in the present embodiment, makes unnecessary a mechanism for moving vertically the slider 1 from the recording medium 3. Also, during head operation the microscopic aperture portion 7 of the slider 1 is protruded toward a direction of the recording medium 3, enabling the microscopic aperture portion 7 to be brought into proximity to the recording medium 3. Due to this, the distance over which a near-field light has to reach for realizing data recording/reading with high sensitivity and high density is not the conventional h but a shorter h' .

Accordingly, a sufficient intensity of near-field light interaction is caused to realize data recording/reading with high sensitivity and high density. A similar effect was obtained where a light detecting element was used in place of the light emitting element 2.

(Embodiment 5)

Fig. 5 is a schematic structural view showing a near-field optical head according to Embodiment 5 of the invention. This is similar to Embodiment 4 except in that a slider 1 is arranged inclined at its bottom surface with respect to a surface of a recording medium 3 and that piezoelectric elements 8 and 8' are different in volumetric change amount, omitting explanations. The present embodiment, in addition to the effect possessed by Embodiment 4, applies different application voltages to the piezoelectric elements 8 and 8' thereby correcting the slider 1 for inclination relative to the recording medium 3. Thus, it became possible to control the microscopic aperture 7 such that it is positioned parallel with the recording medium 3. The near-field light attenuates exponentially with respect to a distance from the microscopic aperture 7. Consequently, the arrangement of the microscopic aperture 7 in parallel with the recording medium 3 realized to produce a near-field light with an even intensity over the entire microscopic aperture 7. Due to this, the present embodiment realized the effect possessed

by Embodiment 4. As an effect besides that, a near-field light producing source is provided by the entire region of the microscopic aperture 7. Thus, a sufficient intensity of near-field light interaction was obtained.

(Embodiment 6)

Fig. 6 is a schematic structural view showing a near-field optical head according to Embodiment 6 of the invention. A plurality of microscopic aperture portions 11, 12 are formed in a bottom surface of a slider 1, respective of which can protrude in a direction toward a recording medium 3 due to piezoelectric elements 8, 8', 8'', 8'''. The other structures and manufacturing method are the same as in Embodiment 4, omitting explanations thereof. Fig. 6(b) is a head top view wherein the piezoelectric elements 8, 8', 8'', 8''' are bonded on both sides of the microscopic apertures 11, 12. The piezoelectric elements 8'', 8''' are applied by a greater voltage than a voltage applied to the piezoelectric elements 8, 8', thereby making h'' smaller than h' . Thus, in a slider bottom surface a vicinity portion 10 of the microscopic aperture is closer to a surface of a recording medium 3 than 9. In addition to the effect possessed by Embodiment 4, this structure allows the microscopic aperture 12 to cause interaction with higher sensitivity than 11. It was made possible to use the microscopic aperture 12 in data recording/reproducing and the microscopic aperture 11 in

tracking. It was made possible to use the microscopic aperture 11 in rough recording/reproducing at high speed and the microscopic aperture 12 in recording/reproducing with high density or verifying reproduced information or the like. Thus, various applications are possible.

(Embodiment 7)

In Embodiments 4, 5 and 6, the rapid change of application voltage to the piezoelectric elements 8, 8', 8'', 8''' can cause the microscopic aperture 7 portion to protrude from the slider 1 surface and be accommodated in the slider 1 surface at the same time of recording/reading. Due to this, in addition to the effects possessed by Embodiment 4, 5 and 6, the present embodiment can access not only a land but also a groove where the recording medium surface has a concave/convex as in a land/groove recording scheme. Thus, high density recording/reproducing became possible.

(Embodiment 8)

Fig. 8 is a block diagram showing a schematic structure of an information recording/reproducing apparatus according to Embodiment 8 of the invention. The difference from Fig. 7 lies in that a near-field optical head 231 at its tip uses a probe having a tip-sharpened protrusion having a size of approximately 100 nm instead of a microscopic aperture as in Fig. 7 and that an incident light from a laser 201 is introduced from below a recording medium 206 to produce a near-field light

205 on a surface of the recording medium 206 due to total reflection. The others are the same as Fig. 7, and explanations thereof are omitted. The incident light is introduced through an optical fiber (not shown) to a side surface of the recording medium 206 and propagates through an inside of the recording medium 206 due to total reflection. On the surface of the recording medium 206 a near-field light 205 is caused by the inside total reflection. The near-field light 205 differs in its intensity distribution depending on an optical characteristic on the recording medium 206 surface, i.e. a presence or absence of a data mark. This near-field light 205 is scattered by a near-field optical probe 231 into a scattering light 208 to be detected by a light detecting element 204. The detected signal is sent to a signal processing circuit 214. The signal processing circuit 214 outputs an output signal 215 and a signal to be sent to a control circuit 212. The control circuit 212 outputs signals to actuators 207, 211 whereby a rough movement mechanism 210 and fine movement mechanism 209 control a z-directional position of the recording medium 206.

Fig. 9 shows a near-field optical head in the present embodiment. The difference from Fig. 1 lies in that a probe uses a microscopic protrusion 301 instead of a microscopic aperture. The near-field light 205 caused by interaction between an incident light 206 and a memory region 4 is

converted by the microscopic protrusion 301 into a scattering light 208. The scattering light 208 may be detected of an component directed toward upward of the recording medium 206 as shown in Fig 8. Or otherwise, as shown in Fig. 9 it is possible to detect a component transmitted through an inside of the recording medium 206. Because the near-field light 205 attenuates exponentially as going away from the recording medium surface, there is necessity to place the microscopic protrusion 301 in a position as close as possible to the recording medium surface. However, in the present embodiment the microscopic protrusion is structured protruding from a slider bottom surface toward the recording medium, and hence can be interacted with a near-field light in a proximity fashion. This realized a high sensitive near-field optical head. Also, the microscopic protrusion if combined with a vertically moving mechanism as in Embodiment 4 can protect the microscopic protrusion from being damaged during head standstill.

(Embodiment 9)

Fig. 10 is a schematic structural view showing a near-field optical head according to Embodiment 9 of the invention. The difference from Fig. 4 lies in that an aperture is positioned in a depressed position located above a slider bottom surface. The other structures and operation mechanisms are the same as those of Embodiment 4, and explanations thereof

are omitted. During head standstill, the aperture is above the slider bottom surface and accordingly not contacted with the recording medium 3. Thus, the aperture was prevented against damage. It is possible to realize a similar structure with a probe having a microscopic protrusion as in Embodiment 8, offering a similar effect.

INDUSTRIAL APPLICABILITY

As explained above, according to a near-field optical head of this invention, in a near-field optical head, having: a slider supported by a suspension arm providing a load weight and obtaining a floating force due to a relative motion to a recording medium, and producing a gap cooperatively with the recording medium due to a balance between the load weight and the floating force; and a probe formed in a bottom surface of the slider, and producing a near-field light or converting a near-field light produced on a surface of a recording medium into a propagation light; wherein the recording medium and the probe interact through the near-field light when the slider scans a surface of the recording medium thereby effecting recording and reproducing information; the near-field optical head characterized in that: the probe protrudes from the slider bottom surface. Accordingly, even if the distance between the slider and the recording medium is several tens to several hundreds nano-meters, it is possible to reduce the

slider bottom surface or an inside of the slider except upon recording or reproducing of the information, and protrudes the probe from the slider bottom surface by or in a predetermined amount or direction upon recording or reproducing the information. Accordingly, in addition to any of the effects, the slider bottom surface and the recording medium surface can be protected from damage in respective modes of during head standstill and at operation start/stop. Also, the parallel arrangement of the probe with the recording medium surface realizes high sensitive head.

Also, according to a near-field optical head of the invention, in any one of the above near-field optical heads, the probe is formed in a plurality of number in the slider bottom surface, the plurality of probes being individually set with the amount or direction of protrusion or both thereof on an each probe basis. Accordingly, in addition to any of the effects, it becomes possible to set a sensitivity on a probe-by-probe basis. Also, one probe can be utilized for tracking or high-speed reproduction.

Also, a near-field optical head according to the invention, in any one of the above near-field optical heads, is characterized by comprising a mechanism which simultaneously performs control of the amount or direction of protrusion of the probe or both thereof, and scans the slider over the recording medium. Accordingly, in addition to any

